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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to emphasize, as stressed by St. Clair (1982), the importance of sociohistorical data in any attempt to determine language attitudes, ethnolinguistic identity, and the ecological status of a minority language. This importance is illustrated within the context of research on language attitudes toward isiXhosa, a Nguni language spoken in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The paper shows that conceptions of isiXhosa identity and ethnicity are often simplistic in nature and do not accurately represent the complexities inherent in the society and history of the isiXhosa-speaking peoples. The implications of this state of affairs for language attitude research are illustrated by showing how the results of an example of such research, which does not take the mentioned complexities into account, remain difficult to interpret. (Contains 20 references.) (Author/SM)

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Language Attitudes and Ethnolinguistic Identity in South Africa: a Critical Review

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The aim of this paper is to emphasise, as stressed by St. Clair (1982), the importance of sociohistorical data in any attempt to determine language attitudes, ethnolinguistic identity and the ecological status of a minority language. This importance is illustrated within the context of research on language attitudes towards isiXhosa, a Nguni language spoken in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The paper shows that conceptions of isiXhosa identity and ethnicity are often simplistic in nature and do not accurately represent the complexities inherent in the society and history of the isiXhosa-speaking peoples. The implications of this state of affairs for language attitude research is illustrated by showing how the results of an example of such research, which does not take the mentioned complexities into account, remain difficult to interpret.

1. Introduction

My original intention with this paper was to provide a diagnosis of the state of the African languages of South Africa: whether these languages are being maintained or are shifting to English. This was to be achieved through an analysis of sociohistorical data and recent language-attitude research and the use of a number of theoretical frameworks. It was based, furthermore, on the assumption that these languages share a similar past and, inasmuch as the ecological status of a language is effected by broad sociohistorical factors, that they would share certain tendencies. So, for example, as recently summarised by De Klerk & Barkhuizen (2002:11), there is in South Africa "persistent functional deficiency and low levels of development for indigenous languages in terms of corpus, status, and prestige." In short, all the indigenous languages of South Africa seem to be in the same state, and for the same reasons.

On unsuccessfully attempting to squeeze all the relevant facts and analyses into a 25 minute paper I soon realised, however, that I had best focus on only one language and only on a limited range of theoretical issues. The similarities between the African languages of South Africa do, however, allow one to make some hypotheses about the ecological status of all these languages based on a study of one of them.

The focus of this paper will be isiXhosa, an Nguni language spoken mainly in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, where I currently work and live, the Western Cape Province, the capital of which is Cape Town, and to a much lesser degree in the Free-State, Gauteng, North West and even other provinces of South Africa (see Figure 1 & De Klerk & Barkuizen 2002:12). The Eastern Cape is what one might call the "heartland" of the isiXhosa-speaking people.

Language revivalists often bemoan the fact that they did not start earlier in their efforts to save a language (Edwards 1994:121). The fact that isiXhosa, with over 7 million speakers (Orkin 1999:12), hardly qualifies as an endangered language, does not, therefore, mean that one should not assess whether the factors for decline are in place or not. More pertinent to the theme of this conference, it is important to assess whether we are witnessing the development of a stable form of bilingualism among isiXhosa speakers or a genuine shift to English, the status-dominant language of the region. To quote Edwards (1994:83), are we dealing with "collective bilingualism ... an enduring quality ... [or] ... the impermanent, transitional variety ... in which bilingualism is a ... way-station on the road between two unilingualisms." This paper highlights an important obstacle which currently lies in the path of whoever wishes to answer such a question. By looking closely at an example of recent language-attitude research in the light of sociohistorical data[1] it shows how more attention needs to be paid to the complexities inherent in the society and history of the isiXhosa-speaking peoples before we can put forward tentative hypotheses about the ecological status of the language.

[1] This emphasis on the importance of sociohistorical data is emphasised by St. Clair (1982:164), who recommends that in order to determine attitudes and the potential for shift towards another language, it is "necessary to reach back into the past and investigate the social and political forces operating within the history of a nation".

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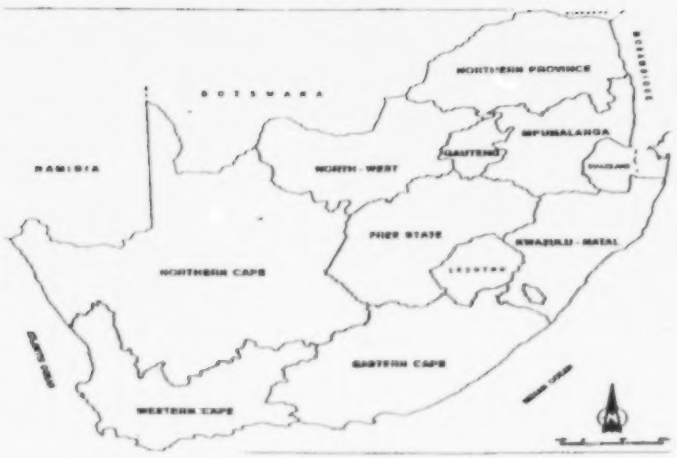
Figure 1



2.IsiXhosa identity

IsiXhosa ethnicity does not meet the requirements of nationalism, as defined, for example, by Edwards (1994:129). There is no evident desire among isiXhosa speakers for political independence. This rejection of political independence relates back to South Africa's Apartheid-days, when South Africa's white rulers attempted to develop ethnic-based nationalism through the creation of homeland states. This was viewed rightly by isiXhosa speakers as central to the government's policy of racial segregation (Herbert 1992:2).

Figure 2 is a map of the old South Africa. The darker parts indicate areas where there is a high prevalence of isiXhosa speakers. For political reasons the map does not show any data for the Transkei homeland, although one can safely assume that the prevalence of isiXhosa-speakers in this area would be the highest of all. For these speakers the Apartheid government created the Transkei and the Ciskei. Citizens of these two homelands were defined on the basis of place of birth or language spoken and lost South African citizenship when obtaining Transkein or Ciskein citizenship (Herbert 1992:4). On an ideological level, resistance to these events took the form of either a broader non-ethnic black nationalism or a broader non-racial South African nationalism.

Of interest too is that the colonial master's notion of what constitutes isiXhosa ethnicity has had little basis in reality. As stressed by Herbert (1992:2) colonial South Africa has seen "the development of a myth of linguistically and culturally homogenous communities within Southern Africa. Commitment to this view has been so strong that it has entailed the *creation* of ethnic groups and the concomitant creation of 'standard' languages that are then claimed to reflect the identity of the ethnic group". Herbert (1992:3) rightly berates the fact that when discussing the future of South African languages the diversity subsumed under the various language names, and the fluid boundaries that often exist between the various so-called "ethnic groups" are often ignored or underestimated.

If a sense of isiXhosa ethnicity (as commonly understood) exists, therefore, it hardly has any separatist pretensions and might to a substantial degree be what Bourdieu (1991:223) calls "the act of social magic which consists in trying to bring into existence the thing named"[2]. The notion of isiXhosa ethnicity is, in addition, explicitly linked to the Apartheid-past. The same applies to the creation of independent homelands

[2] Thus, for example, Bourdieu (1991:223) explains that "the fact of calling 'Occitan' the language spoken by those who are called 'Occitans' because they speak that language (a language that nobody speaks, properly speaking, because it is merely the sum of a very great number of different dialects), and of calling the region ... in which the language is spoken 'Occitanie', thus claiming to make it exist as a 'region' or a 'nation' ... is no ineffectual fiction".

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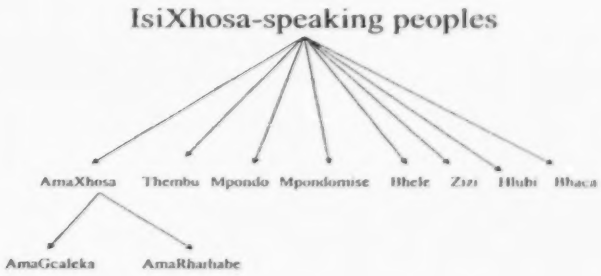
and the utilisation of the standard version of the indigenous language for purposes of learning and teaching. According to Paulston (1994: 31) ethnicity of this kind would be characterised by "little power struggle ... and so the common course is assimilation and concomitant language shift ... Ethnicity will not maintain a language in a multilingual setting if the dominant group allows assimilation, and incentive and opportunity of access to the second language ... are present". As such we should expect that rapid shift is taking place among isiXhosa speakers, at least among those who have access to English.

Figure 2

An important question still requires answering, however. With which social category do isiXhosa speakers strongly identity with, if not with a broader isiXhosa-speaking ethnic group? Many no doubt identify themselves as South Africans. But an additional locus of identity still lies behind the important distinction that exists between the amaXhosa *per se* and other isiXhosa speakers, as illustrated in Figure 3, a distinction which very few non-isiXhosa speakers are aware of.

Figure 3



As pointed out by Peires (1981:ix) the amaXhosa are "those people who claim descent from an ancestor named Xhosa, that is the amaGcaleka and amaRharhabe of the present day. Other people usually classified as Xhosa-speaking, for instance, the Thembu, Mpondo, Mpondomise, Bhele, Zizi, Hlubi and Bhaca have long and proud histories of their own," although according to Meyer (1971:3) all these groups do share common customs and do have close historical ties. According to this author the Mfengu, another isiXhosa-speaking group "whose ancestors were assimilated as refugees from Natal in the early eighteenth century, are set a little apart from Xhosa proper by their remembered 'foreign' origin" (Meyer 1971:3). The

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amaXhosa generally regard themselves as a kingdom, the amaXhosa king being drawn from the royal Tshawe clan. The other isiXhosa-speaking peoples are similar in this regard.

According to Meyer (1971:3-4), another relevant distinction is the Red-School distinction: "the people known as ... 'Red people', or less politely as *amaqaba*, 'smeared ones' (from the smearing of their clothes and bodies with red ochre), are the traditionalist Xhosa, the conservatives who still stand by the indigenous way of life, including the pagan Xhosa religion ... The antithetical type ... 'School people', are products of the mission and the school, holding up Christianity, literacy and other Western ways as ideals" (Meyer 1971:3-4) . From all accounts these are well-defined and generally recognised social groupings and, furthermore, they do not reflect a simple urban-rural distinction. Although most long-term urban isiXhosa speakers adopt School ways, there are Red people who frequent urban areas for periods of time and both groups are found in the rural areas. The question is, of course, whether Meyer's 1971 observations apply 30 years on, in the new South Africa, in which legal barriers to permanent or long-term African urbanisation have been rescinded. It would seem that they do since as recently as a decade ago Thipa (1992:185), for example, refers to the "red-blanketed" Xhosa who have not been subjected to western influences. On a less academic note a recent novel by the South African novelist Zakes Mda, called *The Heart of Redness*, is partly about post-Apartheid South Africa and deals explicitly with the Red-School distinction.

According to a framework adopted by Edwards (1994:140) the isiXhosa-speaking ethnolinguistic group, broadly defined - in other words, including all isiXhosa-speaking peoples - qualifies as unique and indigenous. Whether this group can be characterised as cohesive is, however, in doubt. It seems, rather, that at the level of the amaXhosa or the Mpondo we would have a higher degree of cohesiveness. Future research needs to work at this level, or at least take these distinctions - as well as the Red-School division - into account. Furthermore, the fact that isiXhosa speakers are divided into a number of different groups means that isiXhosa is less likely to be employed as group-boundary marker: emphasis, no doubt, falls on the use of specific dialects or sociolects of isiXhosa. There is the added complication, though in no sense unique to isiXhosa, that the standard dialect, which is often known as isiXhosa by non-isiXhosa speakers, is derived from a particular tribe, the Ngqika, "a tribe within the Rharhabe-Xhosa subdivision of the Xhosa-speaking people" (Loetz, Britz & Pauw 1997:183). What this all means for our general picture of the ecological status of isiXhosa needs, I believe, to be the focus of future research.

3. Language-attitude research

The implications of these facts, particularly for language-attitude research, should be clear enough, but I would like to provide one example of how research conducted in South Africa, although of indisputable merit, remains difficult to interpret by not being specific enough with regards to the complexities just mentioned. This research was undertaken in 1992 in the Eastern Cape and was aimed at assessing attitudes towards the area's main languages: English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa[3]. Respondents were from the three relevant ethnolinguistic groups. The main component of the research was conducted using the Matched-Guise Technique (MGT). Respondents were asked to rate readers on a scale of personality attributes. The readers were three trilinguals – one from each ethnolinguistic group - reading a text in each of the three languages. As is usual with the MGT, respondents were not aware that the "readers" were often the same people. Of particular interest are, of course, the reported attitudes of the isiXhosa speakers.

Figure 4 shows the responses of each language group to language heard. Note that the higher the score the more negative the rating. We can see (from the right hand part of the diagram) that isiXhosa informants rated the combined isiXhosa guises – isiXhosa with a mother-tongue accent, English accent and Afrikaans accent – less positively than the combined English guises.

Figure 5 shows the responses of isiXhosa informants towards accent. We can see (again from the right hand side of the diagram) that the isiXhosa informants rated isiXhosa with a mother-tongue accent more positively than isiXhosa with an English or Afrikaans accent.

The authors comment as follows: "the rank order for Xhosa informants in terms of language is English, Afrikaans, Xhosa (which is surprising) and for accent Xhosa, English and Afrikaans" and explain this in terms of "the tension between the love of one's mother-tongue versus the perceived superiority of English

[3] The complete results of this research are contained in De Klerk & Bosch (1993, 1994) and Bosch & De Klerk (1996). A summary of the research is also contained in Smit (1996:70-71).

and the other official language: Afrikaans". An alternative explanation is that the negative rating of the isiXhosa guises (Figure 4) were the result of negative attitudes towards a discernable use of the L1 by members of other ethnolinguistic groups, as we can see in Figure 5.

Figure 4

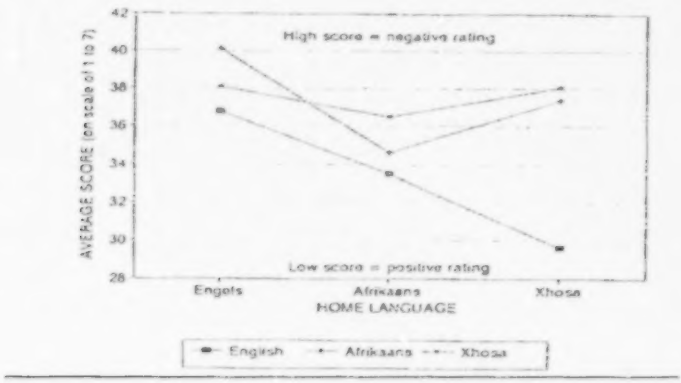
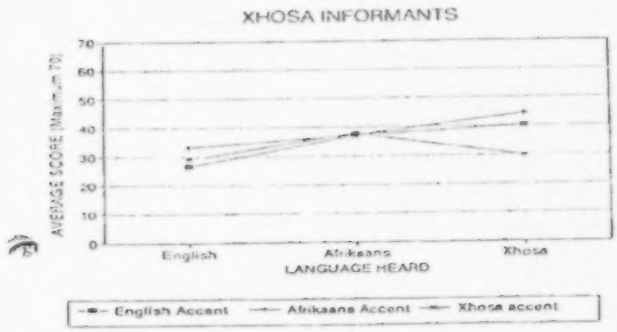


Figure 5



Whichever analysis we accept however, the question remains: how to interpret the results in terms of the broader ecology of the language? In order to do this we need to know who the isiXhosa reader was and who the isiXhosa respondents were. Were they urban or rural, School or Red, amaXhosa, Thembu or Mfengu? Was the reader using standard isiXhosa or a urban or tribal dialect?

Admittedly, the authors do confirm, in a footnote, that the text which was read out in isiXhosa was in Standard isiXhosa, but this does leaves the issue of accent untouched. The authors did elicit information about whether the respondents had an urban or rural background, yet this fails to touch on the important School-Red distinction. If the informants were mostly amaXhosa it would, presumably, have made a difference to the attitudes if the reader was amaXhosa, Thembu or Mpondo. What would the attitudes of the red-ochred *amaqaba* have been, assuming that they could have understood the standard isiXhosa being used? These questions become all the more important when we note the authors' conclusions that "for the Xhosa speaker, perceptions are that Xhosa plays a reduced pedagogical and communicative role and is more symbolic and personal.": the main question being, for which isiXhosa speakers, and towards which kind of isiXhosa? The point here is not to undermine valuable and what might be considered ground-breaking research, but to rather point the way towards future refinement and the development of a clearer picture of

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what is happening on the ground. As it stands this and most other research is difficult to utilise in developing a clear picture of the ecological status of isiXhosa, since we do not know which isiXhosa-speaking sub-group or groups any particular case of research is dealing with. In this regard it should also be pointed out that much language-attitude research that points to more positive attitudes towards isiXhosa (e.g. Louw-Potgieter & Louw 1991; Dyers 1999) suffer from similar defects. This state of affairs has, no doubt, much to do with the unfortunate predominance of researchers in the field who are not L1 isiXhosa speakers themselves (including myself), but this can and should I believe be combated on an individual level by the acquisition of at least a basic ability to communicate in the language and a deeper understanding of the society, history and culture of the various peoples subsumed under the rubric "isiXhosa-speaking". On a broader level one hopes that more L1-isiXhosa speaking linguists will come to the fore in the not too distant future.

4. Conclusion

To return to the original question - with isiXhosa are we dealing with language shift or a stable form of bilingualism? - I believe the answer is simply that we do not yet know. This paper has generated more questions than answers, but I believe that it will have done some good if it inspires any researcher interested in the ecology of a minority language to more fully explore the society, history and culture behind that language. Only if we are acquainted with all the relevant distinctions and divisions can we provide accurate ecological assessments and engage in appropriate forms of intervention. In particular, further research into the ecological status of isiXhosa and other South African minority languages, needs to be preceded by greater knowledge of the societies, history and culture of the peoples involved.

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